

## ANCIENT TRAGEDY: BETWEEN POST-MODERNISM AND “TRANSFER”

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While analyzing the notion of post-modernism, the question that arises is whether the significances, the notions, and the worldviews of ancient Greek tragedy can be “transferred” and fully comprehended and appreciated. To answer the question, two types of antithesis are used: the first relates to the distinction between the transfer and the rendering of ancient tragedy and the second looks into the relationship between synchronicity and diachronicity, which finally defines the modern perspective. Based on these distinctions, the criticism of the post-modern worldview (deconstruction of meaning, formalism, and instrumentalisation of art) leads us to the examination of the possibility of an organic relationship between ancient tragedy and the modern conception of the world.



The birth and evolution of ancient tragedy will remain something unique, an unprecedented moment during the course of human civilization, as Georg Hegel defines it in his celebrated book *Philosophy of History* (1824). What is the historical and cultural value of ancient tragedy in the modern world? Is it possible for the meanings and worldviews that emerge from ancient tragedies, as well as for the ritual-dramaturgical elements themselves that constitute tragedies, to go beyond their spatio-temporal limitations? Is it possible to acquire universality and timelessness and to become fields of understanding and analysis of the crucial, existential problems which modern societies have to confront?

Undoubtedly, there is an extensive bibliography and a great number of solid answers to these questions. This specific approach attempts to place and explore the above mentioned issue in relation to two types of antinomic dualisms which consist of two bipoles. The first concerns the antithesis between the transfer and the rendering of ancient tragedy according to the historicity of the present. The second bipolar entails the relationship between synchronicity and diachronicity. It

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forms a secondary perspective, a meta-level in the analysis of the first antinomic relationship. It is directly connected to the change of the space-time continuum, while appearing in the modern speculation through the relationship of modern and post-modern, at the level of an aesthetic-cultural creation, and—more widely—through the relationship of modernism and meta-modernism. This establishes the fundamental historical contradiction that emerges in the era of globalization.

The first duality predominates epistemologically until the middle of the twentieth century, when the unity of the spatio-temporal paradigm, the historical continuum—with the radical changes and the inevitable ruptures—allowed the researcher to methodologically go through a reflective course, to detect the changes in the modes of perception and representation, while aiming at elevating them to the higher horizon of human values, passions, and trials, characteristic of the human existence, as well as to the worldviews that emerge and are transformed during the long historical period that the human civilization has gone through.

In contrast, and exceeding this linear approach that refers to an evolutionary process, the predominance of the second dualistic structure, that is the change of the spatio-temporal reference field, the segmentation of the historical continuum, the emergence of the “present,” the “ephemeral,” as a basic reference element, transfers us to a new worldview, to a new paradigm, according to the epistemological approach of Thomas Kuhn. In this case, the methodological and epistemological question arises (definitely imperfectly and partly) through the capability of the post-modern to handle performances of ancient drama and to, also, offer a contemporary meaning and dramaturgical characteristics in a historical world that belongs to the shape of the space-time continuity; in other words, in an “asymmetrical” paradigm example, according to Kuhn’s terminology, in which there is complete discontinuity and radical change, concerning the notional schemas, the meanings, the representations, the field of the foundation of the two asymmetrical worldviews.<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Space-Time Continuum: The “Transfer” of the Tragic in the Modern World

The fundamental, methodological question can be put as follows: Is it possible for us to compare the form of the modern world and its cultural creations to historical formations of the past? Can we proceed to the comprehension, interpretation, and transfer of an ancient world’s cultural form, when the notions, perspectives worldviews, theoretical-semantic categories which composed its worldview—for example the worldview of the city of ancient Athenian—referred to and were founded on types of socio-economic organization radically differ-

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1. About the change of space-time continuum and the domination of ephemeral-contemporary see Harvey (2007) 341-72 and Lipovetsky (2004) 90.

ent from the contemporary forms of organization and reproduction? Is it possible, as a consequence, for contemporary scholars and analysts to perceive the structures, the relations, the semantic categories of a historical, social formation, when the organization of this formation does not permit the development of notions and categories that are connected to the modern worldview?

At first, we have to adopt the theory of Tomas Kuhn, that every historical society “recognizes” the world and its own existence through one particular complex of categories and convictions. However, there are lingual and notional interventions capable of conveying intellectual contexts and of forming a model of communication with these historical societies. The transfer of this model enables us to analyze and comprehend societies of the past, specific historical-cultural eras, into their horizon. This transition helps researchers understand the ontological assumptions, the semantic contents, and the relationship between theoretical hypotheses and historical empirical facts through the worldview of the historical society. Through this methodological approach, the modern reflection attempts not only to comprehend the worldview of the past, but also to, simultaneously, reconstruct the cognitive terms and the notional substance of the historical society that is reproduced, and thus survives, by being included in this worldview.

As a consequence, fundamental notions, like the notion of tragedy, or even the ones of fear, mercy, destiny, etc., cannot be transferred to the procrustean bed of the present, neither can they be defined as historical categories which can be comprehended only through the entry into the worldview of the historical past. Every historic and social formation has its own cognitive-theoretical model, according to which it can interpret and understand the historical limits of its era. However, these cognitive-theoretical models are not sealed off from the world. As the historic-social progress of the human forms of life is shaped through continuities, innovations, and ruptures or restrictions, there is an analogous evolution in the theoretical categories and in the notions through which societies conceive and explain their present and their past.

### **Notion and Transfer (Reconstruction of the Meaning, Polysemy, Semantic Reference)**

The first fundamental distinction emanates from the separation between sense and reference. This distinction allows us to ascertain the creative ability of the language “to transform” the already expressed aspects of the world and “to discover new ones” (Ricoeur 606), in order to, finally, result in a form of “heuristic fertility” and creative function of the language.

The linguistic structure of the speakers’ or the interlocutors’ comprehension is able to conceive a specific conceptual identity or continuation, in the majority of verbal variations, through the context. In this sense, this polysemy constitutes an adaptable system which can frame the variety of human experience in the unfolding of social life’s historical and temporal vector. Through the context, a sort of filtration and choice of the variations of the familiar notions can be achieved.

Subsequently, through the reconstruction of the meaning, the interpretation, which befits the substance of this meaning, is defined.

Surely, the change of the cognitive, communicative, and cultural worldview has as a consequence the emergence of the phenomenon of semantic novelty, which concerns both the verbal designation and the emergence of a novel meaning. In this case, one may ask: In what way do the transfer, the reconstruction of the meaning, or even the transvaluation occur? At this point, we can activate, as Imile Benveniste suggests, the dual element of the linguistic types: the semi-otic, which accepts the unit of speech, and the semantic, which is based on the sense of the sentence (qtd. in Ricoeur 609). According to Benveniste, it is only from the sentence that we can ascertain the fact that an object, an incident, or a thought have simultaneously sense and reference (qtd. in Ricoeur 609). In this procedure, Kuhn insists that translation is not confined to a typical matching between linguistic types. A content-based translation has, at first, to retain the value of the truth of the linguistic types. It has to transmit both the sense and the intention (Kuhn 12). As Kuhn clearly states, the verbal-linguistic forms are not homologous among different worldviews. Each word participates in the network of every linguistic structure in which it occurs, presenting differences and similarities in relation to different worldviews. As a result, the simple translation of the linguistic forms is not enough to denote the ancient paradigm; what is important is the attribution (intellectual, notional, methodological) of the mutually defined, traditional, theoretical total, which has to be attributed—and be conceived at the same time—to the modern worldview as a Whole (7).

Therefore, the transfer goes beyond the linguistic-intellectual reference; it approaches and examines the field of the new historical experience that we have gained in the modern world. The notion of tragedy and the tragic in ancient Greece is transferred to the contemporary world; it is not simply mentioned, but gives a new meaning to the present, discovers new aspects of the modern reality, “liberates the possibility of a new interpretation of the world and our self ... [and] describes once again this reality” (Ricoeur 611).

In this context, the contemporary tragic is not only based on the experiences and on the speculative-scientific analysis of our world; neither does it constitute a simple linguistic-notional reference in connection with the ancient tragic. Their relationship, on the contrary, is far more complicated. The modern tragic, the antinomic relations of the modern world—as a womb of production of the tragic—is given a new significance derived from the ancient tragic.

The ancient and the modern tragic are not simply connected to a relationship of similarity, nor are they characterized by a radical incompatibility. Speculative speech relates to the two forms of the tragic, as well as to the interpretative-reflective process which, through the exceeding of the simple transference of the tragic, produces novel senses and forms a new worldview, which in turn composes, in a cohesive schema, purposes, means, causes, value-regulative project.



*Scene from the controversial production of The Persians, directed by Dimiter Gotscheff. Epidaurus 2012. Photo: The National Theatre archive*

## 2. The Notion of the Post-modern

Today, three fundamental terms-symbols constitute the philosophical, cultural, aesthetic, and socio-economic worldview, which appears as a new, negative, and deconstructing—as far as its foundation is concerned—idea that liberates the individual from the traditional “slavery”: post-modernism, meta-modernism, and the term “posterior modernism,” used by J rgen Habermas to describe the anorganic/mediatory relationship between the industrial society of the twentieth century and the modern society of “globalization.”

In the long, perennial dialogue and in the interminable juxtapositions that characterize the conflict between modern and post-modern, between modern/enlightening and meta-modern model, we will place our emphasis on the following assumptions:

a. The post-modern conception in the field of culture—of aesthetic and artistic creation—and the meta-modern analysis in the area of technical-communicative and economic-social structure, respectively, do not comprise a new model towards tradition. They do not comprehend, but interpret; they do not contradict each other, but deconstruct every notion that can delimit interpretations, perceptions, and attitudes.

b. This dominant relativism presupposes and imposes the deconstruction of the notion of the Subject that the classical, sociological studies regard as the “basis

of every analysis,” or explain, based on subjective objectives, social phenomena, “in terms of the plans and the strategies that the individual and the bodies of collective action lay out” (Mouzelis 89). However, the expulsion of the subject, which is replaced by communicative-functional elements, leads to a process without a cognitive-theoretical “centre.” The validity of knowledge and the rational reconstruction of the cognitive elements are substituted by the perceptions of multiple observers (Markis 93). As a consequence, no fundamental principle is composed, but rather the approach to knowledge takes place through the schema of observation. Through this, the comprehension and the analytical approach of a fact give their place to the multiplicity of the interpretative approaches (94). This is the reason why, in the contemporary meta-modern interpretative schema, the subject approaches knowledge through the observations of others, through modern networking and communicative structures (Givalos 366-67).

c. In the same context of analysis, we are led to the dissolution of the research object, the artistic-dramaturgical creation, as a Totality.

Indeed, to the meta-modern perception, an independent reality, which can be considered to be the subject of research, does not exist. There is no difference between a theoretical construction and a given “empirical reality,” since every social phenomenon constitutes nothing more than a symbolic construction (Mouzelis 98). That is the reason why meta-modernists “dissolve” the notional, methodological, and epistemological “boundaries” among individual scientific fields and accept the coexistence and the mixing of notions and approaches deriving from sociology, philosophy, philology, semiology, etc. (Laclau and Mouffe ix). The result is a “scientific medley,” which cannot “claim” any kind of rational “reading” (Mouzelis 106). As Daniel Bell points out, with “codified” coherence,

post-modernism does not wish to “transform” reality, but it wants to withdraw from it, as it happens in some hermetic deconstruction of texts, to mock it through imitation and parody; or to taunt its commercial spirit, by converting itself into merchandise... . Post-modernism does not constitute a contradiction, but an appropriation of the whole, it does not constitute an assault at previous philosophical or literary categories, but the dissolution of classifications, a rotten kettle of speech. (352)

## Change of the Spatio-Temporal Context of Reference

The most powerful, fundamental element of the worldview’s change is the introduction and the reference from the linear-continuous historical chronicity to the axes of the modern spatio-temporal field, which is defined as globalization, as post-modern meta-narration. The disband of the continuum of past-present-future, the ignorance—and often rejection—of the past, the complete inability to define the future targets and evolutions, lead to an ephemeral present which is in jeopardy, according to modern analysts. The ephemeral state and the pres-

entness penetrate, either as analytical categories or as an act, all spheres of modern activity. In the field of production and consumption, emphasis is placed on the virtues of instant, temporary objects and actions which are consumed and disposed after their ephemeral usage. These objects, however, mediate between human/social relationships and actions. The “virtues of the momentary,” subsequently, concern the rejection of stable ways of life and relationships and cause profound changes in the human psychology and behavior. They lead, as Alvin Toffler underlines in his *Future Shock* (1970), to the temporariness of both public and personal value systems and, consequently, to the collapse of collective values and rules and of the collective sense of responsibility towards society. As Jean Baudrillard (1986) pointedly summarizes, these structural changes, which create the environment of deconstruction, the crisis of interpretative logic, represent the triumph of the result over the cause, of the momentary over time as duration, of the surface over the depths of desire.

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The post-modern perception in the fields of art, creation, and knowledge, in an organic relationship with its meta-modern expression in the context of economic and social relationships and modern technological structure, leads to what Habermas (1998) has called “colonization of the bio-world.” According to this view, areas of culture, art and creation, knowledge and science, activities, ideas, rules of law, value models, which are based on the fundamental contents of liberty and the law of solidarity, are incorporated (and commercialized) into the field of economic-administrative system. This historical process, which is directly related to modern neoliberal models, alters the traditional intellectual foundations of the cultural bio-world (truth, knowledge, justice, regulative models) and, subsequently, offers meanings to areas of cultural activities with the symbolic depictions of money, authority, profit, antagonism—in other words, with the fundamental values of the economic-authoritative field (Habermas 208). Nowadays, the deconstruction of meaning, the ephemeral state of cultural creation, the commercialization and the instrumental use of the work of art form the framework,<sup>2</sup> the new worldview, in which the modern creator is asked to work, in almost all sectors of cultural activities.

The playwright, who “elaborates” on the text of ancient tragedy, is urged—according to the deconstructive “imperative”—to proceed to the abolition of the structured narration and to the adoption of a compilation of an intertextual type of “fragments,” which constitute a total of contradictory, heterogeneous, and, often, mutually disproved identities.

It has to be indicated that this co-presence of heterogeneous identities, rep-

2. The commercialization and the instrumental usage of a work of art form, simultaneously, a process of “formation of civilization” of merchandises. As Gilles Lipovetsky points out: “Today every big brand wishes to be ‘cultural,’ that is a ‘living universe,’ look, spirit, sum of values, narration, viewing of the world” (*La Regne de l’Hyperculture* 94).



representations, and signifiers constitutes the essence of the post-modern. If the spectator or the actors attempt to recompose this contradiction, to search for its structural foundations, they are excluded from the optics of the synchronic post-modernism, as they wish a return to the “forbidden” *Logos* and to the substantial contents of the enlightening/historical argument. From the moment that the spectators (as individuals and collective subjects) do not have a stable interpretative basis, they cannot be organically connected either with the ancient text and its writer, or with the contemporary creator, who aims at “reoffering a meaning” to this text through the post-modern fragments. The relationship between spectator/spectators and the ancient text, as well as between spectator/spectators and the modern playwright, remains superficial/formalistic. It is mediated by a medley of fragments constituted by texts, images, set designs, musical scores, and interpretations of the protagonists. The co-presence of these heterogeneous elements finally forms an external, schematic relationship between ancient tragedy, the writer, the director, and the audience.

The “death of the writer/author,” which was proclaimed by Jacques Derrida as the basic condition for the reading and the approach of a literary work, also includes, self-evidently, according to the post-modern perspective, the “death” of the playwright. The play itself does not have an autonomous existence: it is formed and comes into being only if it is considered to be a field of co-presence of the individual interpretations and meanings stemming from the spectators and, specifically, from their individual, particular, singular approaches, which can be refuted in a subsequent performance. The theatrical play—in this case, the performance of an ancient tragedy—is converted into a “galaxy of signifiers,” which cannot be unified in a permanent form through explicit and discernible codes of comprehension and reference. Within this whole framework of disconnection of subject-object organic relationship (spectator – theatrical text – performance) and of its substitution by external-functional connecting elements, the theatrical act and function acquire a self-referentiality, an autonomy, which is founded on the momentary, the ephemeral. Other theatrical performances referring to a relevant thematic and attributed to the post-modernist viewpoint constitute nothing but “dissimilarities.” It is possible for these dissimilarities to be mutually and schematically compared, to resemble each other or to differentiate from one another, without, however, being able to be integrated in a critical – reflective – comparative relationship based on a cohesive meaning that will associate them both with the ancient-historical “testimony” and the “transfer” attempts of ancient tragedy to contemporary texts and performances; texts and performances that pursue either the reproduction or the offering of new meanings to the ancient models.

From the post-modern perspective, the relationship between intertextuality and self-referentiality often arises through the use of literary extracts and codes which can start off from the ancient tragedy, traverse Shakespeare’s work, the Russian literary period of the nineteenth century, the Italian neo-realism or the film noir in the field of cinema, and end up in the scenarios of modern produc-





*Stephania Goulioti played Electra (2007) in Epidaurus, under Peter Stein's directorial guidance, and established herself as a leading actress. Peter Stein's "realistic" reading of Euripides' play was questioned as "inappropriate" by a large number of local critics.*

*Photo: The National Theatre archive*

tions in the cinema, in television series, or in other media. Through the deliberate confusion of spatio-temporal and cultural environments the "hero" can somehow walk on a tightrope between Oedipus, Hamlet, inspector Maigret, etc. In this mishmash of classical and modern ideotypical forms and characters, the post-modern protagonist becomes a sort of mediatory-instrumental element that moves mechanically among these ideotypical forms. S/he neither searches for meaning in the text, nor does s/he pursue to reconstruct characters and roles, but s/he reproduces fragments of texts, heroes, motions, expressions. Finally, the protagonist himself/herself, the actors, become performance "signs" among a variety of signs.

This continuous movement of the actors between sense and non-sense, between emotion, image, and impression, eventually, forms a dual relationship between role and non-role. The actor, balancing between presence and non-presence, resembles, according to Derrida's approach, a "trace," a figure drawn on the sand, which disappears when the wave pops, or, as Lyotard declares, a "fake representation of the form," exactly as the Cat of Cheshire appears in the novel of Louis Carroll *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), as a paradoxical presence that gradually disappears, leaving its last smile as a "trace" of its presence-absence (Bell 339).

The deconstruction of the theatrical text and the theatrical act might notably concern the direction of the play. In the case of post-modernism, this direction follows the deconstructive aesthetic/representational approach that began from

the field of post-modern architecture and involves a mixture of heterogeneous material elements, absence of fundamental aesthetic framework of reference, abolition of symmetry and the natural balance in the scenery, and mainly, in our case, usage of electronic web media and images, intense lighting with a continuously changing flow, direction, and color shades, and, often, sound-music intervention, which, in most cases, becomes independent from the performance's aesthetic-emotional environment, claiming its own heterogeneity.

The image, the fleeting impression, the surprise, and the sound dominance refer to the "colonization" of ancient tragedy's dramatic performance by the television media. In this case, structural, representative, lingual/notional elements, as well as elements of the script and the general spirit of a sub-culture—elements that dominate the television-influenced field of the mass media, appear, unchanged or changed, in the area of the theatrical performance.<sup>3</sup> Through this contemporarisation, the post-modern director asserts that s/he renders the ancient text, the ancient historical reference intelligible and comprehensible; a text which, otherwise, according to him/her, would remain trite, unintelligible, and self-referential, lost in a detached, indifferent past.

These phenomena appear more often in Aristophanes' works, which are converted, due to the necessity of "synchronicity," into valueless revue constructions. The use of popular comedians reinforces this impression. These actors transfer the ideotypics of television series to the world of ancient theatre and impose them upon the spectator, thus trivializing, practically, the ancient text. This entire process leads, inevitably, to the "commercialization" of the theatrical play. The spectator withdraws in his/her privacy and is transformed into a private individual-consumer. On their part, the playwright, the director, and the actors are transformed into commercial producers of an ephemeral cultural product which will be consumed in Greece as well as internationally.

### 3. Post-Modernism or "Transference"

The post-modern version of a classic piece of work—in our case an ancient tragedy—seeking its own artistic and epistemological legitimation, contends that the modern spectator can comprehend ancient drama, as text and as performance, only through the empirical and cognitive facts of the modern world. If we accept this approach as logical, we need evidence to substantiate it.

Some fundamental questions referring to the "nature" of post-modernism itself concern the intention and the textual-directorial approach of the modern "tragic." Are contemporary creators interested in framing a modern meaning? Do they pursue to illustrate the archetypical-ontological elements of human ex-

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3. Theodoros Grammatas underlines this important reconstruction of the relationship of speech and image, outlining the opinion that "the image of Logos," traditionally existing since the days of ancient Greek drama, is substituted by the "speech of image," and that the theater is transformed into a modern form of complicated subject (*On Drama and Theater* 78).

istence as they emerge in the modern world? Do they confine themselves to describing fragmentarily actions and sentiments, which coexist, but not in a unified form? If chaotic multi-signification or the deconstruction of a central notion constitute the main objectives of contemporary post-modern creators, then the setting of limits is clear. Each decoding takes place in the synchronic field of the post-modern and, in this case, the ancient drama, the classic theatrical play constitutes nothing but a schematic starting point, a non-organic reference, which is not fully integrated in the core of the post-modern conception.

On the contrary, in the first case, today there exists a plethora of ancient drama performances which do not aspire to reproduce to the letter what we consider as traditional performance, nor do they try to enrich it with modernist elements. Rather, they are founded on different starting points of comprehension and interpretation that are considerably distant from the ancient Greek model. This kind of ancient drama performances can have as a fundamental starting point the national, racial, feministic, etc. worldview and, through this, they can approach and incorporate, or even give a new meaning to the texts and the dramatic elements of an ancient tragedy (Patsalidis 470). In these cases, the creators do not aim at the cancellation of the original meaning, but at injecting their own meaning, their own understanding, their own passions and worldview. Many times, these approaches are characterized by one-sidedness and unjustified exaggeration, qualities that considerably damage the embedded meanings of ancient tragedy.

If the criterion of meaning constitutes the fundamental point of differentiation between post-modernism, exact reproduced version, and transfer, then these performances could be considered as individual, multi-perspective transfers which do not, however, belong to the post-modern. Maybe, for these cases, we could use—in the field of cultural production—Habermas' term “posterior modernism,” meaning the co-existence of the continuation and, simultaneously, of the novelty that takes place in the field of modern cultural structure. This novelty is mostly accomplished in the domain of directing as well as in the process of giving a new meaning to the text, while continuation is safeguarded by the intellectual foundation, which, in spite of the radical changes that are in progress, does not discontinue being based on the archetypal foundations on which it has relied and from which ancient Greek tragedy emerged.

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